

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES: THE JOHNSON ADMINISTRATION  
AND THE FIVE GREAT PRINCIPLES OF PEACE

by

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## ABSTRACT

The Six Day War of June 1967 was a pivotal point in the history of the Middle East and the world. For the United States, the war created a new political situation that brought about a marked shift in the direction of its foreign policy with the region. Using an in-depth study of primary and secondary sources, including Presidential documents from the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, this study explores the new political situation that emerged from the war and examines the reaction of the Johnson administration to this new reality.

Following the war, the Johnson administration sought to bring a new era of peace to the region. The President expressed this desire in a speech given on June 19, 1967 that delineated Five Great Principles of Peace that were necessary to end the violence in the region. Despite the clear wisdom of the Principles, the Johnson administration was unable to adjust to the new political situation. The resulting history is a story of missed opportunities, and this study focuses on the key failures of the administration in developing a new foreign policy stance: an inability to apply effective pressure on the victors that would open the door to real, meaningful negotiations; an unwillingness to take an active role in promoting communications with those defeated in the conflict; a lack of conviction or any concerted effort towards developing a real policy to limit a

renewed arms race in the region; and a refusal to listen to the real victims of the cycle of war in the Middle East.

For my son Maxwell;  
The driving force in my life

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## INTRODUCTION

On June 5, 1967, over 200 aircraft of the Israeli Air force (IAF) attacked Egyptian forces occupying the Sinai Peninsula and airbases in Egypt. Within a week the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) had occupied the entire peninsula from the Straits of Tiran to the Suez Canal, the West Bank of the Jordan including East Jerusalem and the Old City, the Gaza Strip, and most of the Golan Heights, physically reshaping the Middle East in a way that would affect the region and the world for the next thirty years. But the change was not merely territorial; the political situation had been greatly altered as well.

Despite the devastation and heightened regional tension, the Johnson administration hoped the new situation might open the door for a new era of peace in the area based on strong peace agreements. To accomplish this goal, the President and his advisors developed the Five Great Principles of Peace that were necessary to end the cycle of violence and enable the peoples of the Middle East to live together in relative harmony.

The President announced the Principles during a speech to the Foreign Policy Conference for Educators at the State Department on June 19, 1967. Johnson explained that in order to achieve peace, all nations of the Middle East must agree to these five principles: the right to life of all nations of the region, justice for the refugees, respect for the maritime rights of all nations, an end to

the arms race in the Middle East, and respect for the political independence and territorial integrity of all nations.<sup>1</sup> These tenets would be the basic guidelines by which the United States would negotiate as the United Nations Security Council worked to find agreement on a resolution to deal with the crisis. That resolution (United Nations Resolution 242) was passed in the Security Council on November 22, 1967, and would serve (at least in its rhetoric) as the foundation of the United States' foreign policy towards the Middle East for the next thirty years.

Clearly, the Principles were an ambitious and worthy framework from which to hope for peace; however, the subsequent decades of tension and violence are, sadly, testaments to their failure. This ineffectiveness was established in their drafting and rested on the political situation that emerged from the Six Day War and the beliefs and conceptions that developed within the administration due to this new political reality. The Johnson administration had failed to provide the Israelis with public or private assurances that they would honor their previous commitments, and those of previous administrations, to Israel's security and continued existence, in spite of growing public and congressional support for the small nation. The overwhelming Israeli victory saved the administration from a political disaster that could have developed had the crisis or the war dragged on and rapidly completed a shift in United States' Middle East relations that had seen a gradual rise in the importance of Israel to the United States' interests in the area. Following the Six Day War, the small Jewish state quickly became the United States' primary ally in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> Presidential Remarks: Foreign Policy Conference for Educators, 6/19/67, Statement Box 241, LBJ Library.

This new situation hung over the administration as it attempted to formulate a new policy that would lead to peace. Johnson was unable and unwilling to apply adequate pressure to the newly significant Israelis that could have improved the conditions for peace; instead the administration's policy virtually mirrored the Israelis'. In addition, Israel's growing importance helped prevent the administration from making a concerted effort to open important lines of communication with many of the Arab states involved, making it virtually impossible for the White House to understand the humiliation and anger felt by the Arabs, resulting in a decidedly pro-Israeli stance that would be reflected in the United States' dealings with the region and would help more radical regimes paint the United States as a Zionist devotee that sought to impose its imperial aspirations upon the Arab people.

The new political situation further prevented the United States from adequately pursuing what was arguably the most important principle set forth by the administration: limiting the Middle East arms race. Johnson and his advisors recognized that as the most important ally in the region, Israel would need extensive military aid to protect itself and the interests of the United States. Thus, the administration took the easy road and promoted a policy that amounted to mere political lip-service and even if it had been accepted by the other major players in the arms trade, would have done very little to limit the sale of weapons to the region.

Perhaps the saddest aspect of the new political circumstance was the administration's refusal to listen to those most affected by the situation on the

ground, the Arabs of Palestine themselves. Due to the perceived political importance of those moderate Arab nations that were still willing to talk to the United States and the uninformed preconceptions of the political worthiness of Palestinian organizations, the key players in the administration felt it was more important and presented a better chance of success to deal with established nations. This failure to listen to those most affected was a missed opportunity that could have undercut the entire Arab world's belligerency towards Israel and led to the kind of peace Lyndon Baines Johnson desired.

This study will scrutinize the new political situation of the United States following the Six Day War and will examine the effect it had on the development of United States foreign policy as expressed in the Five Great Principles of Peace as announced on June 19, 1967. Unfortunately, it is an account of missed opportunities and will focus on the key failures of the administration in developing the new foreign policy stance: an inability to apply effective pressure on the victors that would open the door to real, meaningful negotiations; an unwillingness to take an active role in promoting communications with those defeated in the conflict; a lack of conviction or any concerted effort towards developing a real policy to limit a renewed arms race in the region; and a refusal to listen to the real victims of the cycle of war in the Middle East.

## THE MIDDLE EAST THROUGH THE SUEZ CRISIS

Animosity between the Jewish, Muslim and Christian Arabs was essentially a twentieth-century development, although there were periods of tension dating back to the earliest days of Islam. After Muhammad migrated to Medina in 622CE, several of the Jewish tribes around the city resisted his teachings and were subdued by force, including one tribe, the Qurayza, which witnessed the brutal beheading of its men and the enslavement of its women.<sup>2</sup> The following centuries in the Middle East were marked by the expansion of Islam as the dominant political and religious force of the region. However, Jews generally flourished in Islamic society, holding significant positions in such varied fields as politics and the arts. Indeed the Islamic Middle Ages have often been called a “golden era” for Jews in the Middle East.<sup>3</sup>

The rapid expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century and the expulsion of both Jews and Muslims from the Iberian peninsula brought both the Arabs and the Jews under the control of the Sultan. For the predominately Muslim Arabs, life generally improved. Initially, the Jews of the region saw their position deteriorate; they were not granted full citizenship in the Empire, but were

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<sup>2</sup> Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

generally tolerated and in many places had a high degree of autonomy.<sup>4</sup> These long periods of relative tolerance were shattered by periods of extreme violence, but these occurrences were infrequent, and if compared to the Jews in Christian Europe during the same period, the Jews of the Middle East were in a much better position.<sup>5</sup>

The influence of Western political thought and ideology made the nineteenth century one of marked improvement for the plight of Jews in Ottoman lands. A decree called the *Hatt-i Humayun*, issued by the Sublime Porte in 1856, brought equality in policy, if not in actuality, to all peoples of the Empire, regardless of religion. Although their position improved, they remained second-class citizens of the Empire until its fall in 1918.<sup>6</sup>

With the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, control of the Middle East shifted to the various European victors. Under the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, the French would receive either direct control or influence over south-eastern Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Northern Iraq, and much of Northern Palestine. The British would be in charge of (again through either direct control or influence) over the Trans-Jordan region, including southern Palestine. The Allies planned to establish condominium control around Jerusalem and the Holy Lands that included both the British and French and would later add the Italians (with the signing of the Treaty of St. Jean de Maurienne in 1917.)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 49-51.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 13

<sup>7</sup> Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 95.

This multifaceted control would not last long. During the closing stages of the war the British improved their military position in the region as the French continued to handle the brunt of the fighting in Europe. Additionally, direct political control of Palestine was becoming increasingly more important to British leaders who saw the area as a buffer to their holdings in Egypt. The Balfour Declaration, issued by Britain in 1917 in the form of a letter to Lord Rothschild, the president of the British Zionist Federation, declared the British government's desire to see the "establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people" and declared that they would "use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this objective."<sup>8</sup> In making this statement, the British had declared their intention to bring Palestine firmly under the control of the crown and established their position as the primary supporter of the growing Jewish Zionist movement.

Modern Zionism (a term established by Nathan Birnbaum in 1885<sup>9</sup>) was seen by some Jews, principally the largely unassimilated Jews of eastern Europe, as the answer to their long-held status as second-class citizens throughout the world. It sought to promote Jewish political viability in *eretz Israel* through a policy of immigration. By increasing the number of Jews in the region, the community would gain increasing political importance and would eventually bring about the establishment of a Jewish State. This general guideline for the eventual establishment of a Jewish nation was expressed by Theodore Herzl in his book *The Jewish State*, published in 1896, although it did not establish

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>9</sup> Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 1.

Palestine as the target of this effort. The First Zionist Congress, held in 1897, accepted Herzl's vision of political Zionism and gave it a focus: the obvious choice for the future Jewish State was Palestine.<sup>10</sup> From this moment on, the focus of Zionists and their supporters was to try to increase their political influence in the region. This largely entailed trying to gain political support for the movement from a major power, primarily the Ottomans, during this early stage.<sup>11</sup>

In their desire to return to the lands of their fathers, the Zionists overlooked a crucial difficulty, namely that the land they had set their sights upon was occupied by a large number of Arabs. This fact was not lost upon the early leaders of Zionism, but they certainly underestimated the opposition they would encounter from the local population. Few of the leaders of the movement had actually spent much time in the region, and most naively believed that the economic benefits the influx of European Jews would bring to the region would placate Arab opposition.<sup>12</sup>

With the Balfour Declaration, the Zionists believed they had found their Great Power supporter and immigration into the region increased. However, the statement had an unforeseen consequence; it gave focus to the Palestinian Arabs' own desire for an independent homeland, giving purpose to a Palestinian nationalist movement opposed to not only the colonial aspirations of the British but also to the Zionists' expressed desire to establish a strong Jewish entity within their midst. These two conflicting desires made Britain's hold on Palestine during the mandate (1920-1948) increasingly tenuous. Rising Arab opposition,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>11</sup> Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, 5.



expressed in violent protests, caused the British to rethink their somewhat misleading commitment to a Jewish homeland. With White Papers issued in 1922, then again in 1939, the British showed their weakening support for the Balfour Declaration, attempting to limit the number of Jewish immigrants allowed into British mandated Palestine, eliminated large areas of Palestine from inclusion, and changed the political process to favor the Arabs who still held the majority.<sup>13</sup> British backtracking angered the Zionist leaders, but they saw their best chance of attaining their dream lay in supporting the Allies as World War Two erupted. David Ben-Gurion, chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive,<sup>14</sup> declared that Zionists would “fight the White Paper [of 1939] as if there were no war and to fight the war as if there were no White Paper,”<sup>15</sup> and thousands of Palestinian Jews volunteered to serve the Allied cause. Conversely, many Arab leaders believed that their best chance to end the period of European colonialism and the Jewish desire to claim their lands would be to support the Nazis, who had expressed a desire to grant independence to the Arab lands if they came to be in a position to do so.<sup>16</sup>

The defining event for Jews and Arabs alike during World War Two was the Holocaust. As the extent of the atrocities became known in the West, public support for the Zionist call for a Jewish homeland increased, particularly among Jews in the United States who, prior to this realization, had been lukewarm to the idea. In 1942 a meeting of United States Zionists established a set of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>15</sup> Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 162.

resolutions, deemed the Biltmore Program, supporting the settlement of Jews in Palestine and the eventual establishment of a Jewish state in the region. The United States Government was broadly supportive of the measure, and with the succession of Harry Truman to the presidency following the death of President Roosevelt in April 1945, the Zionist cause gained one of its most important supporters. Truman publicly supported the Biltmore Program throughout his presidency, based largely on humanitarian concerns, although the growing influence of the Zionist cause in Democratic politics was not lost upon the President either.<sup>17</sup>

Following the war, it quickly became evident that Britain would be unable to maintain the whole of its world wide empire. The war effort had exerted extreme pressure on the British economy and the process of rebuilding called for a focus on domestic concerns. Additionally, intense pressure came from the White House for an end to colonialism and the promotion of the cause of self determination for all peoples. This pressure was particularly strong concerning Mandatory Palestine given Truman's public support of the Zionist cause.

Faced with Britain's stated intention to withdraw, the United Nations created the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine and, based on its recommendations, the General Assembly approved Resolution 181 on November 29, 1947, which called for a two-state solution with an international regime to govern Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup> Support for the measure was surprisingly strong, with thirty-three votes in favor (including the two super powers), thirteen against

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<sup>17</sup> Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 254.

<sup>18</sup> Oren, *Six Days of War*, 4.

with ten abstentions.<sup>19</sup> The Jewish representatives accepted the resolution, but the Arabs rejected it, calling for an Arab state encompassing Palestine in its entirety.

Arab response to the resolution was immediate and violent. Palestinian guerrilla groups attacked Jewish settlements throughout the region and established road blocks to hinder Jewish movement and communication. Fearing a United Nations backlash if the violence escalated, Jewish leaders concentrated on securing their position, which did include a directed effort to force Arabs out of Jewish dominated regions. However, as the end of the British Mandate approached (it was due to expire on May 15, 1948), Jewish forces took the offensive and reopened the roadways. The overwhelming Jewish success and rampant rumors of murderous atrocities (not wholly unfounded) against the Arab population drove a flood of Palestinian Arabs into neighboring Arab states. With estimates as high as 750,000 Arab refugees fleeing their homes, this created a humanitarian nightmare not only for the people in exile but also for the Arab states that had to find some way to feed and shelter these people. Additionally, as a catalyst for derision and discontent, the refugee problem would plague the region for the rest of the century.<sup>20</sup>

At midnight on May 14, 1948, Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion declared the establishment of the State of Israel; both superpowers accepted and recognized the new state almost immediately.<sup>21</sup> Determined to prevent what they saw as overt injustice toward their fellow Arabs, the ill-equipped and essentially

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<sup>19</sup> Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 257.

<sup>20</sup> Oren, *Six Days of War*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 259.

uncoordinated armies of Egypt, Trans-Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon invaded the fledgling state the next day. The initial onslaught put Israel on the defensive. However, inter-Arab rivalries and quarreling combined with the clear superiority of the Jewish forces who had gained valuable experience on the battlefields of World War Two turned the tide of the battle in favor of the Israelis.<sup>22</sup> To make matters worse for the Arabs, the Israelis held a numerical advantage from the start; during the initial Arab attack, the combined Arab forces consisted of some 25,000 troops attacking a Jewish force of around 35,000.<sup>23</sup> As the war progressed, the Israelis used breaks in the fighting to improve this advantage. By early 1949, the war was over; the Israelis had not only been able to defend their infant state, but had also been able to expand their territory by 30% over what Resolution 181 had granted them.<sup>24</sup> The Armistice Agreements that brought the first Arab-Israeli war to an end were not a peace accord. They established temporary borders based on the military situation on the ground, dividing Palestine amongst Egypt (which maintained control of the Gaza Strip), Trans-Jordan (which held the West Bank, and would, within two years, annex the territory), and Israel. Additionally, they allowed the Arab states to maintain their belligerent stance toward Israel. The impermanent nature of the agreements laid the foundation for continuous outbreaks of violence between Israel and its Arab neighbors, who had been greatly shamed by the outcome of the war.

During the 1950s, the United States under President Eisenhower established a relatively balanced approach toward the Middle East that would

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>23</sup> Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, 35.

<sup>24</sup> Oren, *Six Days of War*, 6.

dominate U.S. relations with the region until 1967. Eisenhower believed that the best way to bring about reconciliation between the Arabs and the Israelis was to treat them both equally. A 1956 diary entry by the President proclaimed, "To take sides, could do nothing but to destroy our influence."<sup>25</sup> The primary concern of the Eisenhower administration was to limit the influence of the Soviet Union within the region. It actively courted Gamal Abdel Nasser after he took control of Egypt during a coup in 1952 and supported his decision to nationalize the Suez Canal, although it opposed his efforts to refuse access to the waterway to Israeli shipping. For the Israelis, the President established the policy of supporting the small nation's right to exist within the boundaries of the Armistice Agreements of 1949 and provided economic support to aid its burgeoning economy.

Tensions in the region remained high during the first half of the 1950s, particularly between Israel and Egypt. Both sides took part in cross border raids and retaliations. During 1955 the cycle of violence accelerated. Nasser concluded an arms deal with Czechoslovakia to bring in large amounts of Soviet arms, including tanks and aircraft that would give the Egyptian military a vast numerical and technological (if not operational) advantage over the Israelis. Nasser's stature in the Arab world soared, a development that did not sit well with Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. For the Israeli leader the time had come for a major showdown before the massive influx of Soviet arms tipped the scales too far toward the Egyptians.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Kathleen Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 97.

<sup>26</sup> Oren, *Six Days of War*, 10.

Nasser provided the perfect pretext for Israeli action when on July 26, 1956 he nationalized the Suez Canal, in spite of agreements signed with Britain and France concerning the Canal's operation mere weeks earlier. Israel had already received some political and military support from France, but Nasser's action brought Britain to Israel's side as well. On October 29, 1956, the second Arab-Israeli war broke out with an Israeli invasion of the Sinai. The plan was for the Israelis to feign an attack toward the Canal, which would allow Britain and France to occupy the waterway under the pretense of protecting it. The Israelis would then drive south and open the Straits of Tiran. The IDF performed brilliantly, but Britain and France were slow to move, and by the time they occupied the Canal Zone, all pretence of a defensive maneuver was gone. Despite being a smashing military success (at least on the part of the Israelis), politically the operation was a total disaster. The international community decried the action, and President Eisenhower, who had refused to denounce Nasser's nationalization of the Canal, called for immediate withdrawal, in spite of Egypt's recent alignment with the Soviets. The Israelis were forced to withdraw after the British and French caved to United States pressure. The prewar situation was restored, with the added precaution of inserting a United Nations Emergency Force to act as a buffer between the two nations.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 303-304.

## THE BUILD UP TO WAR

The situation in the Middle East in the early 1960s was relatively stable. The cease fire agreement that ended the 1956 Suez incident had forcibly reestablished the prewar situation. Israel was forced to withdraw from the territories that it had captured due in large part to political and economic pressure applied by the Eisenhower administration, although it was saved the stigma of United Nations sanctions thanks to the efforts of the Senate Majority leader, Lyndon Baines Johnson.

In general, the United States under President Kennedy tried to continue a broadly even-handed stance toward all nations of the Middle East. Several moderate Arab nations were recipients of United States military aid, including Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The young President worked toward reconciliation with Nasser, although relations with Egypt would fluctuate between mild contempt and outright disparagement, but in general the United States was able to use economic aid (totaling \$880 million by the middle of 1963, mainly in the form of food shipments) to provide a counterweight to the growing influence of the Soviet Union on Nasser and prevent Egypt's total alignment with the

communist Superpower.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, Israel was sold Hawk Missile systems in 1962, marking the first public sale of high tech United States arms to the Jewish state.<sup>29</sup>

The election of Levi Eshkol as Israeli prime minister in 1963 helped to maintain the relative tranquility. Eshkol was a moderate, particularly in foreign affairs; he held “a belief in the possibility of Jewish-Arab coexistence.”<sup>30</sup> He felt that Israel could become a viable nation “within the borders of the armistice agreement.”<sup>31</sup> This, however, did not mean that he was weak on defense. Recognizing the importance of the IDF as a deterrent to Arab aggression, the new prime minister worked hard to gain increased support from the United States. He was fairly successful in the endeavor, attaining increased economic and military aid, including assurances from President Johnson and his administration that “It [Israel] can always count on the United States in an emergency.”<sup>32</sup>

The new American administration attempted to maintain the balanced attitude in United States’ relations within the region. It continued providing military and economic aid to both the Arab states and Israel. For the United States the Arab world was divided into two camps: those (primarily Saudi Arabia

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<sup>28</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Vol. XVIII: The Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1964-1967*, 33, Memorandum from Robert Komer of the National Security Council Staff to the Presidents Deputy Special Counsel (Feldman), March 23, 1964, source Johnson Library, NSF, Country File: Israel, Vol. 1. [http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xviii/d.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xviii/d.html).

<sup>29</sup> Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, US Foreign aid to Israel, updated April 25, 2007, <http://www.fas.org/spp/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, 219.

<sup>31</sup> Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, 221.

<sup>32</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Vol. XVIII: The Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1964-1967*, 65, Memorandum of Conversation: Johnson/Eshkol Exchange Views, Washington, 1 June, 1964, source LBJL, NSF, Country File: Israel, Vol. II. [http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xviii/g.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xviii/g.html).



and Jordan) that maintained good relations with the west and generally resisted Soviet influence into the region and were therefore deemed moderate and those (primarily Egypt, Iraq, and Syria) who resisted Western influence and expressed nationalist desires and accepted Soviet influence and material. These states were deemed radical. In general, Israel was treated on a par with the more radical Arab regimes, whereas the moderate Arabs received such offensive items as military aircraft and tanks.<sup>33</sup> Arms sales to Israel were limited to munitions and parts. The United States refused the sale of modern armored units requested by the Israelis in 1964, based in large part on the conclusion that “the United States could not afford the losses in the Arab states” that such a sale would cause.<sup>34</sup> The United States stressed that it was opposed to any Israeli moves to acquire a nuclear deterrent.

Most of the Arab countries recognized the benefit of keeping tensions low, and several attempted to deal with the Israelis. King Hussein of Jordan initiated top secret meetings in 1963 in order to “exchange views on day-to-day security, facilitate practical cooperation, and explore the possibilities of a settlement.”<sup>35</sup> Even the head of the Egyptian Army and close personal friend of Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser, Abdel Hakim Amer, sought a secret meeting with Mossad chief Meir Amit in 1965, hoping to gain Israel’s help in improving deteriorating relations with the United States in return for improved dealings

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<sup>33</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Vol XVIII: The Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1964-1967*, 82, Telegram From Department of State to the Embassy in Jordan, Washington, August 4, 1964, source National Archives and Records Administration, RG 59, Central Files 1964-66, DEF, 12-5 JORDAN. [http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xviii/i.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xviii/i.html).

<sup>34</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Vol XVIII: The Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1964-1967*, 49, Memorandum for the Record, Washington, April 30, 1964, source LBJL, NSF, Country File, Israel, Tanks, Vol I. [http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xviii/e.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xviii/e.html).

<sup>35</sup> Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, 226.

between Egypt and Israel. Unfortunately, the more militant members of the Israeli government pressured Eshkol to refuse this opportunity, and the meeting never occurred.<sup>36</sup>

The main point of tension in late 1966 and early 1967 was between Israel and Syria, and it was clearly a two-sided affair. Avi Shlaim describes a “Syrian Syndrome” held by many in the IDF leadership and the Israeli government stemming from past conflicts and intensified by the emergence of an extremist and radical Ba’athist regime in Syria in 1966, which led Israel to take a more militant stance towards its northern neighbor. Unofficial Israeli strategy promoted by the highest echelons of the IDF was to provoke a Syrian response by violating the demilitarized zone, then retaliate with increased fury in order to “compel the Syrian regime to desist from its hostile activities.”<sup>37</sup> For its part, Syria led efforts to divert the head waters of the river Jordan, thereby denying the Israelis access to much needed water and provoking several retaliatory strikes from Israel. In addition, Fatah raids into Israel from Syria combined with continual skirmishes in the demilitarized zone steadily increased anxieties between the two countries.

On April 7, 1967, the Syrian shelling of an Israeli tractor that had entered the demilitarized zone rapidly escalated into full blown air combat, resulting in the downing of six Syrian MiGs and swiftly increasing tensions, and setting the stage for the Middle East crisis that would engulf the region the following month.

The situation remained tense during early May. Relatively minor incidents along the northern border brought increasing Israeli threats of retaliation.

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<sup>36</sup> Judith A. Klinghoffer, *Vietnam, Jews and the Middle East: Unintended Consequences* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 72-73.

<sup>37</sup> Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, 234.

Nasser, whose standing among the Arab states had been failing and who was under increasing Arab pressure to stand up to the Israelis, used this explosive situation as evidence to support a Soviet warning that the Jewish state was preparing a major invasion of Syria. If this were true (there is no proof that it was), Egypt was bound by treaties and agreements that called for action on its part. Nasser followed through on the threats he had been making to remilitarize the Sinai. Moving the Egyptian army onto the peninsula was an unexpected move, but it raised little real concern in the United States or Israel.

The United States believed that Nasser was trying to improve his diminishing stature in the Arab world through saber rattling and propaganda. Israeli intelligence confirmed these beliefs. Levi Eshkol, likewise, believed that the Israeli military could crush the Arab nations with ease; however, the situation made for excellent political fodder to attempt to increase global support, particularly from the United States. The Prime Minister had warned, "We are surrounded by a serious encirclement of hostility and that which doesn't succeed today could well succeed tomorrow or the day after."<sup>38</sup>

In Washington, the Johnson administration continued to monitor the situation with little concern. After all, Nasser had acted similarly in 1960 in an attempt to relieve Arab pressure to act against the Israelis.<sup>39</sup> However, the situation took a nasty turn on May 16, when Nasser sent a letter to the commander of the United Nations Emergency Force, General Rikhye, requesting the evacuation of United Nations forces, and moved the Egyptian army deeper

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<sup>38</sup> Oren, *6 Days of War*, 60.

<sup>39</sup> William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 2001), 25.

into the Sinai.<sup>40</sup> The letter was urgently forwarded to Secretary General U Thant, who promptly ordered withdrawal. By May 19 the UNEF troops began to pull out, leaving the two adversaries face to face for the first time in ten years.

As soon as Nasser's request to remove the United Nations' forces became known, the Israelis began to seek assurances that President Johnson would hold to the guarantees of Israel's existence and security that had been made by the various administrations over the years. On May 18, Prime Minister Eshkol responded to a telegram that Johnson had sent him several days earlier. He was concerned about the lack of comment in the President's telegram to the "specific American commitment so often reiterated to us between May 1961 and August 1966." To the Prime Minister, the escalation of the situation had created an "urgent need to reaffirm the American commitment to Israel's security with view to its implementation should the need arise."<sup>41</sup> Johnson was unable and unwilling to give the Israelis his public support at this time, since he wanted to be completely clear as to what, exactly, these promises would guarantee. As the United Nations' forces continued to evacuate their positions, the President was aware that the United States had previously committed, "(a) to prevent Israel from being destroyed and (b) to stop aggression - - either through the UN or on our own."<sup>42</sup> Clearly there was a moral, if not material, requirement on the part of the United States to support and protect Israel. For now, however, the President and his administration decided to wait and see how the situation developed.

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<sup>40</sup> Oren, *6 Days of War*, 69.

<sup>41</sup> Department of State Telegram, 5/18/67, #19, Middle East Crisis Box 17, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>42</sup> Memorandum for the President, 5/19/67, #21a, Middle East Crisis box 17, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

Unfortunately, it only got worse. On May 22, Nasser announced that he was closing the Straits of Tiran, at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba, to Israeli shipping. Until this action, the view of the Johnson administration was that “all Nasser wanted was a limited propaganda victory.”<sup>43</sup> The remilitarization of the Sinai had been mildly alarming and the request for the removal of UNEF troops seemed foolhardy, but neither was a violation of law nor a cause for war. However, the closing of the Straits of Tiran had long been considered an act of war by both the Israelis and the United States. According to American policy “the Gulf [of Aqaba] comprehends international waters and ... no nation has the right to prevent free and innocent passage in the Gulf and through the Straits [of Tiran].” Should these rights be denied, the United States was, “prepared to exercise the right of free and innocent passage.”<sup>44</sup> Pressure grew on the administration to fulfill its commitment to aid Israel. Instead, it stalled, choosing to stress that “Israel would not be alone unless it chooses to go alone.”<sup>45</sup>

War seemed increasingly likely. This put the United States in a difficult position, since any action it took would seriously damage relations in the Middle East. As stated by the former ambassador to Egypt, Lucius Battle, who had been recently appointed Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs, “whatever we do we are in trouble. If we fail to stand by Israel, the radical Arabs will paint us as a paper tiger. If we stand by Israel, we will damage ourselves

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<sup>43</sup> Memorandum for the Record, 5/24/67, #98, Middle East Crisis box 17, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>44</sup> Memorandum of February 11, 1957, 2/11/57, #36, Middle East Crisis box 17, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>45</sup> Memo for the Record: Meeting on the Arab-Israeli Crisis held on 26 May, 5/27/67, #32, Middle East Crisis box 17, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

seriously with all the Arabs.”<sup>46</sup> The President wanted to assist Israel in her plight, but the escalation of the Vietnam conflict and Cold War commitments in Europe made it practically impossible to commit the military to the potential of a new crisis. In addition, the growing outcry against the war in South East Asia made the prospect appear extremely tenuous politically, at least to the administration which chose to ignore the growing public and congressional support for Israel in the United States. For many it made more sense to support Israel, who held similar ideological and political aspirations than to support the South Vietnamese, whose commitment to democracy and freedom were suspect at best. There appeared to be some time to maneuver: intelligence reports as late as May 26 indicated that the situation on the Israeli Egyptian border appeared static and there was no “military reason why we should make any declaration or any military moves now.”<sup>47</sup>

The President and his advisors saw in the closure of the Straits of Tiran an opportunity to relieve tensions by forcing Nasser’s hand. They asked the Israelis to delay any action as long as possible in order to let the United States try to pressure Nasser to reopen the Straits. This was to be done by sending a multinational flotilla through the straits. Although designed to be a challenge to the legal aspects of Nasser’s closure of the waterway, the effort, dubbed the Red Sea Regatta, was perceived by many, including all Arab governments, as clear support for Israel. The administration hoped that Nasser would back down, but he did not, and even moderate Arab governments felt the United States was

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

“seriously risking hostility of the entire Arab world and complete loss of influence in the area for the indefinite future by the appearance it has given to Arabs of identifying itself with Israel over the Tiran Straits and other related issues.”<sup>48</sup>

International support for the effort was extremely weak as well. Despite contacting more than eighty countries, the administration could only secure firm support from three, one of them Israel.<sup>49</sup> The plan was virtually dead by the beginning of June.

The administration had struggled since the beginning of the crisis to maintain the policy of even-handedness that had long been the emphasis of the United States' relations with the region. Johnson stressed this point in a public statement made on May 23. The President said:

To the leaders of all nations of the Near East, I wish to say what three American Presidents have said before me – that the United States is firmly committed to the support of political independence and territorial integrity of all nations of that area. The United States strongly opposes aggression by anyone in the area, in any form, overt or clandestine.<sup>50</sup>

In trying to walk this political tightrope, the administration was unable to follow through on Presidential commitments made to the Israelis while at the same time honoring its relations with the moderate Arab regimes in the region. It became increasingly clear that in its actions, particularly in its position on the Straits of Tiran, the administration had “chosen sides - - not with the constructive Arabs

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<sup>48</sup> Telegram from Embassy Amman to Secretary of State, 5/26/67, #29b, Middle East Crisis box 17, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>49</sup> David Schoenbaum, *The United States and the State of Israel* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1993) 152.

<sup>50</sup> The Situation in the Near East: Statement by the President, as Read for Radio and Television, 5/23/67, #63, Middle East Crisis box 17, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

and Israel but with Israel alone against all the Arabs.”<sup>51</sup> This choice was made without overt statements of support or military adjustments that could have provided the Israelis with political assurances to prevent a preemptive strike. The administration informed the Israelis that presidential commitments without the support of the public and Congress meant little; the President and the Israelis both knew that public support for Israel in the United States was strong and growing stronger every day. Congressional leaders had stressed that “The clear majority sentiment in the House of Representatives is pro-Israel. They feel Israel is being ‘pushed around’ by Nasser.”<sup>52</sup> Despite this, the administration would not provide the Israelis with a public or private commitment, instead pressing them hard to delay any preemptive military action. This could have been disastrous, as the Arab forces used that time to prepare defenses, reinforce units, and solidify Arab support for the actions of Egypt, including the consolidation of Jordanian forces under Egyptian command in an agreement signed on May 31st, thus potentially undermining one of the key advantages the IDF held against its Arab opponents: Arab factionalism. Moreover, the administration essentially informed the Israelis that even if the diplomatic effort failed (and it was becoming increasingly apparent that it would), there would be no support from the United States if the Israelis initiated the shooting. The Israelis were supposed to sit in an elevated state of readiness, stretching their economy to its limit, while the Arabs strengthened their position. In the view of Israel, this would only allow a

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<sup>51</sup> Arab-Israel: Where We Are and Where We’re Going, 5/31/67, #2b, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>52</sup> Memorandum for the President, 6/1/67, #15, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.



hardening of the situation into the status quo and a rewarding of the Arabs for bellicose saber rattling and idle threats, further detracting from Israel's security.

Clearly the United States was in no position to prevent a disaster for the Jewish state if the IDF struggled against the combined forces of the Arab world; the Sixth Fleet, the primary United States military asset in the area, had not even been moved closer to the crisis zone, and the small number of ground troops available remained in Italy, three days away.<sup>53</sup> But if the IDF did well, the United States might well forfeit its credibility and influence with the Israelis. All the administration could do was to wait and see and begin planning to "produce minimal damage to the United States' position in the world and to our position in our own country."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Memo for the Record: Meeting on the Arab-Israeli Crisis held on 26 May, 5/27/67, #32, Middle East Crisis box 17, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>54</sup> Memorandum for the President, 6/4/67, #69, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

## INABILITY TO INFLUENCE THE VICTORS

The first reports that major fighting had broken out on the Israeli-Egyptian border reached the White House situation room at 2:38 on the morning of June 5.<sup>55</sup> Clear information on the direction of the combat was slow to arrive. The Arab countries were broadcasting messages declaring that overwhelming success on the battlefield was at hand, but as the morning wore on the situation became more confused. The Israelis informed the administration that they had responded to an Egyptian armored assault, while the Arab nations were reporting that Israel had opened hostilities without provocation. The White House worked to ascertain the facts. By the end of the first day, the reports were fairly certain that, first, the conflict resulted from an Israeli pre-emptive strike and, second, that it had been very successful. Nasser began to call for his Arab allies to initiate action, while intelligence reports indicated that five UAR airfields were out of commission, and the IDF was driving hard against the Egyptian Army in the Sinai.<sup>56</sup> Later that night, around 7:00, upon seeing a picture of himself with the

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<sup>55</sup> Middle East Crisis timeline, Middle East Crisis box 17, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>56</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XIX, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1967*, 151, President's Daily Brief, source Johnson Library, National Security File, Middle East Crisis, Vol. 6, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/johnsonlb/xix/28058.html>.

Secretaries of State and Defense on the cover of the Washington Evening Star, the President remarked, "There's a picture of a sad man."<sup>57</sup>

Johnson may have been saddened by the fact that he had been unable to prevent bloodshed, but he certainly could not have been dismayed at the direction the war was taking and the clear effect it would have on the political situation of the United States. There would be no need to explain how the United States was unprepared to aid the Jewish state as it foundered under an Arab assault. Having sided with the Israelis during the build-up to the war, the administration continued this tactic. For the White House, the deciding factor in their attempts to end the fighting was, "how well the Israelis do - - or don't do - - on the ground."<sup>58</sup> The administration saw an opportunity in the one-sided affair. If the Israelis could take enough land before the United Nations Security Council could agree upon an end to the fighting, the "de facto situation on the ground" could be used to "negotiate not a return to armistice lines but a definitive peace in the Middle East."<sup>59</sup> It was clear that the 1957 cease fire arrangements were wholly incapable of preventing the cycle of violence that might well destroy the Middle East and continually threaten global security. A new situation was needed, and the apparently overwhelming Israeli victory that was developing on the battlefield would allow the United States to seize the opportunity to create a new era for the region.

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<sup>57</sup> Middle East Crisis timeline, Middle East Crisis box 17, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>58</sup> Memorandum from Walt Rostow, 6/5/67, #22, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from Walt Rostow to President concerning Nat Davis Report, 6/6/67, # 41, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

As the second day of fighting began, Cairo radio reported that United States naval forces and aircraft had provided direct assistance to the IDF during the opening stages of the War.<sup>60</sup> Of course, these accusations were fabricated, and the White House worked diligently to ensure that the “Big Lie”<sup>61</sup> was recognized as such. But the damage had been done in the Arab world, and the oil-producing countries proclaimed their intention to halt the sale of oil to any nation that had been involved in the fighting in support of Israel. Enormous demonstrations were held throughout the Arab world against United States embassies and facilities. Any remaining influence America had retained with the Arabs during the month of May (and it wasn’t much) quickly evaporated.

Despite these developments, the superpowers were able to orchestrate an agreement on a simple cease-fire. By 4:30pm on June 6, the United Nations Security Council had passed a resolution calling for a cease fire, which was intended as a first step.<sup>62</sup> The Israelis accepted the cease fire, as did the Jordanians, but Egypt, Syria, and Iraq vehemently rejected the proposal because it did not require unconditional withdrawal.<sup>63</sup>

In his announcement of the cease fire declaration, the President announced the administration’s vision of developing a meaningful peace in the region. He proclaimed that the action represented a “very hopeful path away from danger in the Middle East” and that it was a “first step toward...a new time

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<sup>60</sup> FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XIX, Arab-Israeli Crisis, 1967,171, source National Archives and records Administration, RG 59, Central Files 1967-69, POL 27 ARAB-ISR, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/johnsonlb/xix/28058.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Oren, *6 Days of War*, 275.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 237.

of settled peace and progress for all the peoples of the Middle East. It is toward this end that we will now strive.”<sup>64</sup> With this goal in mind, the President and his advisors felt that it was necessary to establish a separate group that would bring the “most competent people in and outside [the administration]...to determine what [the] problems are and what needs to be done.”<sup>65</sup> He brought in former National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy to head this new Special Committee of the National Security Council.

From its first meeting, the discussions of the Special Committee reflected the new foreign policy direction that had developed during the prewar period and had hardened as the war progressed. Its members immediately recognized that due to the administration’s unwillingness to reassure the Israelis and offer any strong assistance, the United States’ relationship with Israel had changed. The stellar performance of the IDF had saved the White House from the political disaster that would have resulted if the Israelis had struggled, and the United States could not provide assistance, which they were in no position to provide. It would not have taken the annihilation of the IDF and Israel to bring about disgrace for the United States. If the fighting had been slightly more even, and had caused the war to drag on for an extended period of time, the United States would have been in an even worse predicament. Fortunately for the administration, these eventualities did not develop, but one thing was sure: the Israelis had saved the administration on the political battlefield. There would be

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<sup>64</sup> Remarks of the President Regarding the Cease-Fire vote of the United Nations Security Council, 6/6/67, #43, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>65</sup> NSC Special Committee meeting notes, 6/7/67, #52, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 1, National Security File, LBJ Library.

no executive pressure on the Jewish state to yield its gains as had occurred during the Suez Crisis more than ten years earlier; the United States would not be able to force the Israelis to “accept a puny settlement.”<sup>66</sup> Having all but destroyed its standing among the Arabs, and lost much of its credibility as a defender of Israel, the administration determined that the United States would have to become “attorneys for Israel” in order to improve their standing with the victorious nation, now their primary ally in the region.<sup>67</sup>

Resistance to the new alignment with Israel came from the State Department, which expressed the need for the administration to stay true to pre-war declarations like the one made on May 23 that the United States supported territorial integrity. The administration, having determined that withdrawal without some sort of peace was out of the question, informed the State Department that “Old boundaries cannot be restored.”<sup>68</sup> For the White House, the only direction that would work and bore any chance of leading to peace was “Linking withdrawal to [a] peace settlement.”<sup>69</sup> It seemed obvious to the administration that the ground being gained by the IDF could be used as a bargaining chip to coerce the Arabs into easing relations with their Jewish neighbor; this would have the added bonus of rewarding the Israelis for preventing a political catastrophe.

Even as the war still raged, the administration, mainly in the forum of the Special Committee, began to develop a plan to achieve its goal of a viable peace

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Memorandum for the Record, 6/7/67, #55, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 1, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>68</sup> Memo from Bromely Smith to President, 6/11/67, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>69</sup> NSC Special Committee meeting notes, 6/7/67, #52, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 1, National Security File, LBJ Library.

that would result in the President's Five Great Principles of Peace. Key questions arose over the prewar commitment to territorial integrity and avoidance of hostilities. Having claimed that they were "firmly committed to the support of political independence and territorial integrity of all nations of that area" and that "The United States strongly opposes aggression by anyone in the area," how could they now stand by the nation that had fired the first shot in their attempts to hold on to lands they were still acquiring?<sup>70</sup>

The question of who fired the first shot was a matter of perspective. Clearly the Israelis had struck first, but the administration argued that the Soviets and the Arabs had created a situation that spun out of control, and the Israelis had little choice but to act preemptively. The Israelis had laid out their thinking during the build-up to the war, and the White House understood their position. The Special Committee determined that if the United States had been put in a similar position, it would probably have acted in the same manner.<sup>71</sup> In the eyes of the Johnson administration, the question of who fired the first shot was moot, since both parties were at fault in bringing about the crisis.

Territorial integrity was a different question altogether. The sheer scope of the lands conquered made the situation difficult. When the war finally ended on June 11, the Israelis were in possession of nearly 42,000 additional square miles including the entire Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the

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<sup>70</sup> The Situation in the Near East: Statement by the President, as Read for Radio and Television, 5/23/67, #63, Middle East Crisis box 17, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>71</sup> Memorandum for the Record, 6/7/67, #55, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 1, National Security File, LBJ Library.

entire West Bank, including the Old City of Jerusalem.<sup>72</sup> As Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara noted shortly after the fighting ended, the United States was “in a heck of a jam on territorial integrity.”<sup>73</sup>

There was some feeling that the White House would have to accept responsibility for its past statements and that the Israelis would have to return some land in order to aid the peace process.<sup>74</sup> But the Israelis were in a position of power and had already indicated that they would not withdraw without the recognition from the Arab states of its right to exist and a plan that would guarantee security.<sup>75</sup> The White House’s hands were tied; having failed the Israelis prior to the war, the amount of pressure it could bring to bear to achieve a relaxation of their position was very limited.

The White House could possibly use the Israeli need to replenish its arsenal to bring about concessions, but with the damaged relations between the United States and all the Arab states, Israel was now the United States’ main political and military ally in the region. The United States had been one of the first nations to recognize the Jewish State in 1948, and although it had been generally able to maintain friendly relationships with many nations of the region, public support for Israel had only grown stronger during the war.<sup>76</sup> There was a clear need for the United States Government to aid the Israelis with their security needs, and arms could not be used as bargaining point.

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<sup>72</sup> Oren, *6 Days of War*, 307.

<sup>73</sup> NSC Special Committee meeting notes, 6/12/67, #38, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 1, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Memorandum from B.K. Smith, 6/12/67, #122a, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>76</sup> Memorandum from Dixon Donnelly to the Secretary of State, 6/14/67, #41, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 3, National Security File, LBJ Library.



Yet the United States did enjoy new leverage with Israel, who had “For 20 years...sought a special relationship...with us [the United States].”<sup>77</sup> Finally being in that long desired position, the Israelis would not want to relinquish it lightly, especially given the generally pro-Arab sentiment in the United Nations. Resolutions were already being put forward in the Security Council by the Soviets calling not only for a return to the armistice lines but also for strong condemnation of Israel as the aggressor, which would damage the standing of Israel throughout the world. In this precarious circumstance, Israel would need the support of the United States.<sup>78</sup>

But the Johnson administration had to tread carefully as well. The United States needed the Israelis to help defend their interests in the region, particularly given its strained relationship with the Arabs. If the Israelis were unwilling to yield any newly acquired territories, the United States would have to act against Israel or be perceived as unprincipled in the Arab World. But if it abandoned the Israelis, the United States would be viewed as a weak ally who was unwilling to stand up for a friend in need. The Soviets would certainly use this situation to improve its position with the Arab nations and around the globe. Additionally, the administration’s standing on the domestic front, already being challenged due to its position on Vietnam, would be further damaged given the enormous public and congressional support for Israel; the prospects for achieving any future

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<sup>77</sup> Arab-Israel: Where We Are and Where We’re Going, 5/31/67, #2b, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>78</sup> Memorandum for the Control Group, 6/12/67, #92, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 1, National Security File, LBJ Library.

political victories would be extremely bleak and the President's entire foreign policy program would be called into question.

The Special Committee dedicated much of its discussion to the issue of territorial integrity and troop withdrawal. It was under strong pressure from moderate Arabs to "Ensure that she [Israel] is unable to realize any gain as a result of this aggression."<sup>79</sup> By supporting a policy of no withdrawal without peace the committee feared that it would "create a revanchism for the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century." But the United States' position was too weak to bring about any other conclusion. In the end, the administration would designate territorial integrity and political independence as the last of its Five Principles, but would tie that support to the establishment of peace in the region, stating:

Certainly troops must be withdrawn, but there must also be recognized rights of national life - - progress in solving the refugee problem - - freedom of innocent passage - - limitation of the arms race - - and the respect for political independence and territorial integrity.<sup>80</sup>

By linking troop withdrawal and territorial integrity to a peace plan, the administration placed its support firmly behind the Israelis, further damaging its relations with the Arab world and decreasing the prospect of the permanent peace it sought to achieve.

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<sup>79</sup> King Faisal's reply, Jidda 5272, 6/12/67, #10a, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>80</sup> Presidential Remarks: Foreign Policy Conference for Educators, 6/19/67, Statement Box 241, LBJ Library.

## UNWILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE DEFEATED

The United States' position with Israel was not the only relationship that had been greatly altered during the Middle East Crisis. Relations with the Arab world had deteriorated due to the appearance of total support for Israel as expressed in the United States' attempt to challenge the closure of the Straits of Tiran. This situation grew worse during the war, as Egypt and several other nations broke off relations with the United States, citing allegations of collusion with the IDF during the initial stages of the war. As the administration sought to develop its new postwar position, this lack of communication with the Arab world, particularly with Egypt, would lead to the development of a one-sided policy as stated in the Five Great Principles of Peace.

As the administration sought to develop a plan that would lead to a stable peace in the region, it failed to make any attempt to communicate with the most important Arab player that would have to agree to a peace, namely Egypt. In the Special Committee, initial discussions focused on the administration's anger with Nasser. As it became clear that the Egyptian Army was enduring a demoralizing defeat, the committee discussed its belief (and hope) that the Egyptian President might be ousted. It was clear that the Egyptian people were going to need aid

and economic rehabilitation, but as long as Nasser remained in control, United States movement on this front would have to wait.<sup>81</sup>

The White House was quite upset with the Egyptian President for his actions in the period leading up to the war and the false accusations and subsequent dissolution of relations during the first days of combat. It was quickly established that the administration would be very careful not to make any moves toward Egypt that would improve Nasser's standing in the Arab world. This meant that there would be no communication and that "Nasser had some things to say and do" before the United States would talk to him.<sup>82</sup> The decision not to speak with Nasser made a comprehensive postwar settlement all the more difficult to achieve.

Shortly after the war, the Egyptians sent an invitation to Ambassador at Large Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. to go to Cairo and meet with them. The administration determined that "now was not the time" to resume communication with Nasser.<sup>83</sup> The Special Committee was concerned with the effect it would have on its relations with Israel as Lodge himself was considered to be a "red flag to Israelis."<sup>84</sup> Additionally, the White House was clinging to the hope that Nasser would be overthrown and did not want to hinder that possibility.<sup>85</sup> In fact, it would be over six years, long after the death of Nasser in September 1970 and

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<sup>81</sup> NSC Special Committee meeting notes, 6/7/67, #52, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 1, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>82</sup> NSC Special Committee meeting notes, 6/8/67, #48, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 1, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>83</sup> NSC Special Committee meeting notes, 6/13/67, #36, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 1, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>84</sup> NSC Special Committee meeting notes, 6/14/67, #30, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 1, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>85</sup> NSC Special Committee meeting notes, 6/13/67, #36, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 1, National Security File, LBJ Library.

the conclusion of another Arab-Israeli war in 1973, before the United States and Egypt resumed their relationship.

The administration's grudge against Nasser was certainly based on legitimate complaints. Nasser had been pivotal in the escalation of the crisis. He had also put about damaging lies about United States involvement in the fighting and broken off communications in an attempt to salvage his position in the Arab world. Additionally, he had walked away from the first cease fire proposal in an attempt to "preserve something of his position and leadership."<sup>86</sup> But as the White House was shunning Egypt, it had no problem consulting with the Jordanians throughout the crisis. To be sure, Jordan had neither broken relations nor played as integral a role in the crisis as Egypt, but it had been compliant in the effort and had suffered devastating losses as a result. Before the war started, King Hussein had signed an agreement with Nasser placing his military under Egyptian command and authorizing troops from other Arab nations to be stationed in his country.<sup>87</sup> Once the war began, he made statements supporting Nasser and shelled Israel. But to the White House, these infractions were minor due to the good relations Jordan had maintained with the United States before the crisis and Jordan's perceived importance in establishing peace.

The White House briefly hoped that negotiations between Jordan and Israel might divide the Arab nations that were aligned against them and

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<sup>86</sup> Memorandum for the President, 6/7/67, #53, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>87</sup> Oren. *Six Days of War*, 130-132.

eventually lead to peace.<sup>88</sup> This was a peculiar assumption, given that recognition of Israel by Jordan would have drastically undermined King Hussein's political position within his own country, a fact the White House certainly understood. Regardless, they explored the possibility of a meeting between the two nations, but the two sides were unable to come to terms and the meeting never took place.

Due to this focus on Jordan, whose relationship with the United States was damaged, but not destroyed, the administration was unable to draft a policy and a program for peace that stood any chance of being successful. They understood the general feeling of the Arab world against allowing Israel to "realize any gains as a result of this aggression."<sup>89</sup> Egypt's reaction would certainly have been along those lines, but the issue was primarily between Israel and Egypt, not Israel and Jordan (or any other moderate, friendly Arab nation). By not even listening to or negotiating with the principal opponent in the conflict, the administration placed its support further behind the Israelis and formulated a policy that was based entirely on the concerns of the victors, totally disregarding those of the defeated.

Additionally, by ignoring the Egyptians, the administration failed to capitalize on an opportunity to damage the Soviet Union's standing in the region. The Soviet Union's standing had been greatly damaged, like that of the United States and Israel, by its unwillingness to aid the Arabs once the fighting had

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<sup>88</sup> Memorandum for the President, 6/7/67, #53, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>89</sup> King Faisal's reply, Jidda 5272, 6/12/67, #10a, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

begun. To the Arabs, the Soviet failure had lowered their standing to the point where “Nasser and other Arab leaders” were “putting both governments in the same category.”<sup>90</sup> The door was open to the United States to dramatically improve its political situation in the Arab world, but the administration did not take advantage of the opportunity because of its anger against Nasser. Had they been willing to take the initiative and at least listen to Nasser, they could possibly have undercut the gains the Soviets had made in the region during the early sixties.

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<sup>90</sup> Cable from Embassy Rabat, 6/8/67, #84a, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

## A LACK OF CONVICTION IN PROPOSING AN EFFECTIVE ARMS LIMITATION POLICY

The fourth point of the Five Great Principles of Peace was the need to limit the arms race that had enveloped the region over the preceding decade.

Johnson said:

The United States, for its part, will use every resource of diplomacy, and every counsel of reason and prudence, to find a better course. As a beginning, we propose that the United Nations should call upon its members to report all shipments of military arms to the area.<sup>91</sup>

This call demonstrated a severe lack of conviction and realistic dedication to the admirable goal of limiting arms. A policy of simply reporting arms transfers stood little chance of actually reducing the influx of arms to the region, let alone of preventing the resumption of the arms race. Once it became clear that the plan would receive little support in the international community, the administration exacerbated its failure by not reporting its own arms sales, calling into question its desire to attain this admirable goal.

As the Middle East crisis developed, it became clear that one of the major issues for the region was the influx of arms that had allowed the crisis to take on the scale it had. It was deemed “desirable urgently to raise the problem of

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<sup>91</sup> Presidential Remarks: Foreign Policy Conference for Educators, 6/19/67, Statement Box 241, LBJ Library.



limiting future supply of arms to the Arab states and Israel.”<sup>92</sup> To this end, three possible courses of action were established. The first option was a negotiated arms limitation device as part of a general settlement for peace in the Middle East. This option was deemed to be “the least feasible,” as it would require the initiation of peace negotiations between the parties, a possibility that seemed increasingly remote.<sup>93</sup>

Another option would be to establish an agreement between the primary suppliers of military hardware to limit the amount and type of weapons that could be sold to the nations of the region. Although this option would certainly have helped limit the arms race, it would have been extremely difficult to orchestrate because it “smacks of great power domination...and these countries themselves will be sensitive to the reverberations of resentment from the Arab countries and Israel.”<sup>94</sup>

The final option would be to establish, through the United Nations, an international registry of future arms shipments to the area. As the least intrusive program, this choice would certainly provide the easiest way to gain agreement. However, as it would leave the actual choice on limiting arms to the suppliers without any commitment to reduction, it was “less certain to be effective.”<sup>95</sup> Upon review by the Special Committee, the administration decided that it would pursue this final course.

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<sup>92</sup> Restraints on Arms Shipments to Israel and the Arab States, 6/12/67, #64, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 2, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

The administration's initial inquiries with the international community were less than positive. The Ambassador to the United Nations, Arthur Goldberg, failed to find a third party to propose a resolution. He reported that "neutral parties [are] not eager to press arms registration."<sup>96</sup> The possibility of directly sponsoring a proposal was discussed, but in the end the administration favored making a statement either in the United Nations or in another forum. Eventually, the arms registry proposal was presented in the Five Great Principles of Peace Speech.

There were precedents for the attempt to establish an arms registry, all of them bad. It had been proposed several times since the Suez Crisis. President Eisenhower had vaguely proposed an attempt to limit the sale of arms to the region, as had several other nations, including the Soviets in 1957.<sup>97</sup> An arms registry in the region was attempted several times, including a proposal in 1965 from which the United States had abstained because it felt that, "divorced from other arms control measures, [it] would be ineffective."<sup>98</sup> The very concept of a registry was suspect, having only had one effective attempt, and this dealt with the United Nations registry of satellites.<sup>99</sup> The administration plainly recognized that an arms registry would probably not get approved; the administration itself had rejected the concept less than two years earlier. Despite recognizing that

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<sup>96</sup> NSC Special Committee meeting notes, 6/15/67, #27, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 1, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>97</sup> Background of Middle Eastern Arms Registration, 6/20/67, #59b, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

the “prospect for movement along this line is not good,” the administration pushed on in the direction of an arms registry.<sup>100</sup>

Once the proposal had been made, the administration pursued its plan with little success. Even the British were “surprised and unhappy with the proposal.”<sup>101</sup> The administration discussed the possibility of proceeding on a unilateral basis. This was determined to be too risky a venture due to the high probability of total failure in enticing the international community to join the effort. It would also put United States’ allies on the spot, a position they would certainly resent. Finally, it would be perceived as an anti-Arab ploy to embarrass the Soviet Union, damaging the White House’s global dealings with the Communists.<sup>102</sup> The international arms registry idea was essentially dead by September, only two months after its initial proposal.

Arms limitation to the Middle East was certainly a goal worth pursuing; the influx of arms to the region had evidently heightened tensions and had ensured that disagreements between Arabs and Israelis would have deadly consequences. The administration recognized this fact, but in its effort to rein in the arms race, it chose to pursue the easiest route despite the strong prospect of failure. If it had pursued a more worthy plan, such as an attempt to gain an agreement among the major arms suppliers, the result would probably have been the same, but the United States would have at least displayed a real desire to limit the supply of arms in the region and a deep commitment to peace. Instead

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<sup>100</sup> Status of Efforts to Curb the Influx of Arms to the Arab States and Israel, 6/14/67, #78, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 1, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>101</sup> International Registration of Arms Shipments to the Middle East, 7/9/67, #55b, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 3, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

it displayed a total lack of conviction for stopping the arms race by proposing a weak plan that it knew had little chance of success.

## REFUSAL TO DEAL WITH THOSE MOST AFFECTED BY THE CONFLICT

Perhaps the biggest failure of the United States' new policy toward the Middle East that emerged after the Six Day War was the administration's refusal to include the Palestinians in their plan for peace. During his speech on June 19, President Johnson exclaimed that the United States was "ready to see any method tried, and we believe that none should be excluded altogether."<sup>103</sup> Yet in the development of the Five Principles, his administration had already failed to take the open-minded step of viewing the Palestinians as a people rather than a group of Arab refugees. To be sure, "justice for the refugees" was delineated as the second principle, but that justice apparently did not include a voice in decisions concerning their own future.<sup>104</sup>

During the development process the administration never discussed the Palestinians as a people, preferring to focus on them as refugees. In this, the United States was certainly not alone. Their closest Arab allies also viewed the Palestinians as refugees, and expressed great, if not entirely benevolent,

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<sup>103</sup> Presidential Remarks: Foreign Policy Conference for Educators, 6/19/67, Statement Box 241, LBJ Library.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

concern over their well being.<sup>105</sup> On this front the administration claimed to be working “for refugees and residents on both sides,” including stressing to the Israelis the importance of encouraging the residents of the region to remain and approval of continued funding and support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East.<sup>106</sup>

When the administration was presented with the prospect of an Israeli attempt to work with the Palestinians to create a semiautonomous state, they balked at the idea. It was seen as an attempt to annex the West Bank from Jordan, a prospect that was determined to be ripe with “political danger,” that would “make general Arab-Israeli peace more difficult to imagine, and would create another Arab grievance.”<sup>107</sup> The United States was too focused on making sure that King Hussein remained in control and on the microscopic prospects of a Jordanian-Israeli peace deal to even explore the possibility.

The administration underestimated the importance of the Palestinian issue. Led by Yasser Arrafat and the PLO, a vision of Palestinian nationalism was quickly taking hold. But Johnson “encouraged Israel to negotiate with King Hussein” and refused to view the situation as anything other than a refugee problem which was clearly dealt with in United Nations resolution 194 of 1948.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Cable from Embassy Rabat, 6/8/67, #84a, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library and King Faisal’s reply, Jidda 5272, 6/12/67, #10a, Middle East Crisis box 18, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>106</sup> NSC Special Committee meeting notes, 6/14/67, #30, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 1, National Security File, LBJ Library and State Department Memo to Amman, 6/16/67, #43c, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 2, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>107</sup> Control Group Memorandum for the President, 6/2/67, #14, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 2, National Security File, LBJ Library.

<sup>108</sup> Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, 262.

It is unfortunate that Johnson would cling to a resolution that had not worked for twenty years. The Israelis had begun negotiations with the local Palestinian leadership with promising results.<sup>109</sup> This avenue probably represented Johnson's best hope for attaining a durable peace. Unfortunately, without a powerful mediator, a role the United States could have assumed, the discussions stalled and the brief opportunity was gone.

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<sup>109</sup> Control Group Memorandum for the President, 6/2/67, #14, Files of the Special Committee of the National Security Council box 2, National Security File, LBJ Library

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite denials that the United States had botched its handling of the situation, Johnson's Five Principles demonstrate that the President and his administration had realized that the Israelis had prevented a political crisis that would undoubtedly have called the President's entire foreign policy agenda into question. Israel's growing importance as an American ally was highlighted by Nasser's unfounded accusations that the United States had physically intervened in the conflict and the subsequent severing of diplomatic relations by the Arab nations. Johnson was also clearly influenced by the astronomical support for Israel in the United States; of 17,445 letters sent to the White House in the first days of the war, 96% supported Israel.<sup>110</sup> Israel was now America's closest friend in the region, and for the administration, it would not have been wise to apply too much pressure on them for major concessions.

There was an obvious disconnect between Israeli desires and those of the United States. Although it understood Israel's new importance, the Johnson administration failed to recognize the Israelis' determination to hold onto some of the occupied lands. The day after the war ended, Israeli forces destroyed the Maghrabi quarter of the Old City in front of the West Wall.<sup>111</sup> Within a week the

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<sup>110</sup> Oren, *6 Days of War*, 234.

<sup>111</sup> David Neff, "Settlements In U.S. Policy," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23, (1994): 54.



Jerusalem city limits were rearranged, and several hundred Arabs had been moved from the city to ensure an Israeli majority.<sup>112</sup> Citing the 1907 Hague convention (which had long been considered customary international law) and the Fourth Geneva Accord of 1949, the United States and the United Nations harshly criticized these measures but took no steps toward reversing them.<sup>113</sup> In fact, these actions were not mentioned in Johnson's Five Great Principles speech, and Jerusalem was only mentioned briefly: "There must be adequate recognition of the special interests of the three great religions in the Holy places of Jerusalem."<sup>114</sup> On 24 September 1967, Prime Minister Eshkol publicly proclaimed Israel's intentions to rebuild settlements in the Etzion block, an area that had been occupied by the Jordanians in the 1948 war. Johnson declared that this went against his Five Principles but again took no further action.<sup>115</sup>

On 22 November 1967, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted a British version of a previously proposed solution, called Resolution 242. This resolution fell far short of a solid peace plan. It called for Israeli withdrawal, but gave no specifics on the timing or scope of the pullback and attempted to establish long-term peace treaties between the Arabs and the Israelis, but gave no time line for their implementation.<sup>116</sup> In addition, the Refugee problem was barely mentioned. The resolution became the basis for American policy and the "cornerstone of all future peace efforts in the middle

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<sup>112</sup> David Neff, "Jerusalem in U.S. Policy," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23, (1993): 21.

<sup>113</sup> Adam Roberts, "Prolonged Military Occupation: The Israeli-Occupied Territories since 1967," *American Journal of International Law* 84 (1990): 53.

<sup>114</sup> Presidential Remarks: Foreign Policy Conference for Educators, 6/19/67, Statement Box 241, LBJ Library.

<sup>115</sup> Neff, "Settlements In U.S. Policy," 55.

<sup>116</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, 46.

East down to the late 1990's" and to the present day, but it has failed to bring the two sides closer.<sup>117</sup> The Arabs wanted withdrawal before negotiations and the Israelis wanted negotiations before withdrawal.

The Johnson administration could merely talk about its hopes for a lasting peace. Even after Resolution 242 was passed, it exerted little pressure on Israel to conform to the decree. Instead, it was forced to sit by and watch as the Israelis began their settlement and deportation policies. Boggled down in Vietnam, the administration was unable to provide the assistance and military assurances that could have prevented the war and were not in a position to aid the Israelis had the fighting gone against them. When the IDF destroyed the Arab armies, the United States was saved the embarrassment of not being able to assist an ally. The entire situation in the Middle East had been altered: American relations with many of the Arab countries had been greatly damaged, and Israel became the United States' closest and strongest ally in the region. The administration's hands were tied. It could not apply the same intense pressure on Israel that Eisenhower had, due to the increased importance of the Jewish state as the prime defender of United States' interests in the region and fear of losing more influence to the Soviets in the Middle East. In addition, given the rapid rearmament of the Arab forces by the Soviets, the United States could not use military aid as a carrot to gain more concessions from the Israelis due to the strong public and congressional support for the Jewish state. The White House and the country's foreign policy were now completely behind the Israelis.

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<sup>117</sup> Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 346.

The administration also refused to have any contact with Egypt, the prime antagonist in the crisis. In so doing, it failed to acknowledge that there were two sides to the conflict and that two sides would have to be a party to the solution. Additionally, by isolating Nasser, the administration allowed the Soviets to resume the position of influence with Egypt. The Arabs made it clear that there was an opening for the United States to increase its influence. Unfortunately, the administration chose to act like an angry child and refused to have any contact.

To make matters worse, the administration failed to stand up and pursue an effective arms limitation policy. Instead of proposing a bold plan that could have helped limit the influx of arms into the region (however improbable), the White House decided to take the easiest course, that it knew had little chance of getting approved, let alone of reducing arms. By taking this road, the administration merely paid the problem political lip-service and demonstrated their lack of commitment.

Perhaps the only opportunity to attain a lasting peace would have been thorough support of Israel's brief attempts to deal with the Palestinians directly. Unfortunately, the President and his advisors failed to recognize the growing importance of the PLO and the Palestinian nationalist movement and preferred to deal with Jordan. If the administration had deemed that the PLO was not a viable representative for the Palestinians, they could have sought a more acceptable option. Instead, they ignored the Palestinians, choosing to see them merely as refugees, and thus denied them a political voice.

The Five Great Principles of Peace sought to establish a general understanding of the key issues required to bring about peace in the Middle East. In this the administration was fairly successful; the basic concepts of every nation's right to exist, an answer to the refugee situation, maritime rights, limiting the arms race and territorial integrity and political independence were noble ends, and the international reaction, particularly from western nations, was positive. But in its drafting, the administration ignored its own recognition that it was "a time not for malice but for magnanimity; not for propaganda but for patience; not for vituperation but for vision."<sup>118</sup> In so doing, it failed to demonstrate the open mindedness and flexibility that were certainly required to achieve the noble goal of a strong and lasting peace in the Middle East.

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<sup>118</sup> Presidential Remarks: Foreign Policy Conference for Educators, 6/19/67, Statement Box 241, LBJ Library.

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